

[SHORT NOTE]

AN UNUSUAL MAORI WAR CANOE PROW WITH EMBRACING FIGURES

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KEYWORDS: Maori; war canoe; embracing figures; Arawa; Rotorua.

An unusual Maori war canoe prow in the collection of the Hull Maritime Museum, Hull, England has recently been brought to my attention. The prow has been in the Hull Maritime Museum since 1951 when it was sent there from the Science Museum, South Kensington, London. It had been presented to the Science Museum, London in 1876 by R.H. Rhodes through S.H. Wright of French Gate, Doncaster (Letter, H.G. Lyons, Director of the Science Museum to H.E. Vaile of Auckland, 26 September 1923, Ethnology Department files, Auckland Museum). In 1923, the Director of the Science Museum also supplied a fine sketch of the prow with detailed measurements. In 1892 it had been displayed in the Liverpool Naval Exhibition. Further enquiries to the Science Museum, London have confirmed this information and noted the Science Museum registration number as 1876–1502.

This is a pitau type of war canoe prow (Figs 1, 2) painted red, with an overall length of 213.4 cm, height 71.1 cm, width 71.2 cm. In most respects it is a very large standard type of pitau prow with the usual forward-facing figure of stylised form and sweptback arms, central vane with pierced pitau or takarangi spirals separated by an openwork figure, transverse rear panel, and figure(s) facing into the canoe, all carved from one solid piece of timber. One of the arms of the front figure has been broken off and one of the figures behind the transverse board has lost its head. However, two features mark this prow as unusual. First are the extremely large yet delicate openwork takarangi spirals on the central vane, remarkable for their regularity and fine carving.

The second special feature, which makes this prow unique to my knowledge, is the replacement of the usual single figure, called a huaki, facing rearwards into the canoe by a pair of embracing figures with their bodies facing each other and their heads turned towards the stern of the canoe. The complete figure is carved in naturalistic style with incised female tattoo patterns on the forehead and sides of the nose. Unfortunately, the other figure, presumably male, has lost its head but the rest of the body survives. They embrace from a seated position with their legs crossed over each other and large naturalistic three fingered hands around the back of the opposite body. Also unlike most other canoe prow huaki figures, they have been carved almost free of the transverse panel, projecting up from the base and joined to the panel only at the back of the head. In describing a huaki “bulkhead” figure from the war canoe named Parihaki that belonged to Ngati Pikiāo on Lake Rotoiti in 1853 (Neich 2001:20), the collector Gilbert Mair, who was fluent in Maori, called it a patutu, which might reflect a Ngati Pikiāo dialectical variant term for such figures. The naturalistic style of this Ngati Pikiāo huaki/patutu figure, which has also lost its head, is remarkably similar to the Hull Museum figures. It must be noted however, that Parihaki canoe may have been carved by Tuhourangi experts from Lake Tarawera.

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Fig. 1. Side view of the war canoe prow with embracing figures at the rear. Photo: Hull Maritime Museum.

In a recent survey of the occurrence of all known examples of this embracing figures motif (Neich 2001:280–285, 396–398), it was documented on one canoe paddle, on ancestor memorial palisade posts, gateways of fortified villages, exterior amo side posts of storehouses, doorways of storehouses, meeting house ridgepoles, meeting house door lintels, interior meeting house central ridgepole support posts, exterior amo side posts of meeting houses, and on small epa panels usually located below the window of a meeting house either on the porch back wall or inside the house. The canoe paddle is dated from 1834 and the other examples range through the middle and later nineteenth century. This survey revealed that this embracing figures motif was virtually confined to land-based architectural structures and is very characteristic of the Rotorua Arawa tribes. Most of the earlier examples of this motif up to about 1860 are by Ngati Whakaeue with one or two by Ngati Pikiāo. Ngati Pikiāo continued to use it sparingly but it was taken up strongly by Ngati Tarawhai in the 1870s. Ngati Pikiāo had ceased to use it by about 1890 but Ngati Tarawhai continued to develop and vary the motif considerably into the twentieth century.

As made clear by this survey, the embracing figures motif had not been documented previously on canoes and indeed was never expected in this context. Consequently, the canoe prow in Hull represents a surprising new record. Normally associated with ideas of fertility, the joining of descent lines, and political co-operation between descent groups, the reference for

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Fig. 2. Detail showing embracing figures, the female with facial tattoo marks. Photo: Hull Maritime Museum.

this motif in a war canoe is more problematic. The presence of a naturalistic female figure carved into a war canoe, which was customarily a strongly male domain, raises several other interesting questions. All indications are that the other figure, now missing its head, would have been a male. Out of the approximately 33 examples of embracing figures whose gender can be determined, four are male to male, the rest being male to female. There are none representing female to female.

On stylistic grounds, the carving of this prow can be probably attributed to Ngati Pikiao experts. In particular, the naturalistic body forms of the huaki figure, the form of the prone figure below the central vane, and the form and surface decoration of the face below the huaki figures, all suggest Ngati Pikiao carving style. Through the nineteenth century until the 1860s, many large war canoes were being produced by Ngati Pikiao experts with totara timber obtained from the forests around Lake Rotoiti and Lake Okataina (Neich 2001). However, apart from the prow figurehead and the huaki figure of Parehaki canoe, the two best-documented Ngati Pikiao canoe carvings are stern-posts (Neich 2001:164). The prow figurehead from Parehaki canoe is not very similar to the Hull figurehead and the stern-posts do not provide a shared form for comparison. Sadly, no other Ngati Pikiao surviving canoe carvings are now documented but many of the nineteenth century canoe carvings now held in museums must be their work.

Therefore, this note adds another attributed record to that corpus and documents the previously unrecorded carving composition of embracing figures featured on a war canoe prow.

Acknowledgements. I thank Hermione Waterfield of London and Les Jessop of the Hancock Museum, Newcastle for telling me about this prow. Peter Fitzgerald of the Science Museum, London supplied further information. Arthur Credland of the Hull Maritime Museum was especially helpful in answering my enquiries and supplying photographs.

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